

# The Spectrum of Service: Refocusing Academic Work through a Military Lens

**Brenda Helmbrecht**

California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

**Dan Reno**

University of Nevada, Reno

Put the welfare of the nation, the Army and your subordinates before your own. Selfless service is larger than just one person. . . . The basic building block of selfless service is the commitment of each team member to go a little further, endure a little longer, and look a little closer to see how he or she can add to the effort.

—*The U.S. Army Values*

Activities other than research and teaching...have little exchange value, no matter how highly they might be valued on an individual basis by fellow faculty, by administrators, or society...they generally appear under the ill-defined and seldom-rewarded category of “service” in promotion and tenure evaluations, a category to which the work of writing administrators is too often relegated.

—*Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Administration, Council of Writing Program Administrators*

In higher education, faculty, administrators, and students often use the term “work” casually: we go to work, we do our work, and we always have work left to finish. Thus, we appreciate the journal’s editors asking us to slow down and fully consider our work as instructors and scholars in the field of

composition studies. Here we explore what it means to approach work through the lens of service. While service is an essential component of academic work, we seldom explore how the two concepts inform one another. As a WPA and an Army veteran, we decided to join our unique notions of service to reconceptualize the term to highlight how service shapes our teaching and research. When we began collaborating, we found common ground in how we conceived of the “ethic of service” that shapes our work. Moreover, Dan’s military background influenced our thinking about where and how service fits into the work we do as compositionists. Much of our work is supported by a commitment to service, a term we understand to mean more than academic titles or the committees we sit on and goes beyond personal military aspirations. By refocusing service as central to knowledge production, we can newly theorize how ideas are generated, disseminated, and consumed in our field.

In *Terms of Work for Composition* (2000), Bruce Horner describes three conventions for using the term “work.” Horner regards work “simultaneously as an activity, the product of that activity, and the place of its practice” (p. xvii). In other words, work is located in our teaching practices, the writing we produce,

and our institutions and classrooms. Further, when instructors and students meet in academic spaces, they collaboratively shape and define each other's work. We interrogated the relationship between service and work in our unique experiences to create a foundational definition for our collaboration as student and instructor. In supporting Dan as a graduate TA, Brenda wanted to understand and validate Dan's experiences as a soldier, including the literacies he developed during his service. By identifying service as a commonplace for our work, we could identify and understand our "ideological assumptions" about each other's work from a relative vantage point (Horner, 2000, p. 7).

To explore the relationship between work and service, we consulted texts that explicitly address the work of Writing Program Administrators, in part because service and work seem closely intertwined within administration. Linda Adler-Kassner's (2008) *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writing and Writers*, Theresa Enos and Shane Borrowman's (2008) edited collection, *The Promise and Perils of Writing Program Administration*, and Susan H. McLeod's (2007) *Writing Program Administration* help us frame the work we do together, but these texts do not explore service. Paul Heilker and Peter Vandenberg's (2015) edited collection, *Keywords in Writing Studies*, offers detailed discussions of thirty-six terms that shape the field, yet it also omits "service." In contrast, Horner (2000) highlights the commitments that become "lumped under 'service,'" a nebulous catch-all category for committee work, assessment, advising, and leadership positions (p. 2). As Horner suggests, service is hard to make concrete and to commodify, unlike the number of classes we teach or articles we publish. If service is an important part of our work—and we believe it is—understanding who and what we serve could further ground our teaching and scholarship. Each point on the academic triad—teaching, scholarship, and service—should equally inform each other as they constitute our work.

Positioning composition "on the border between the realms of the academic and the social" (Horner, 2000, p. 3) enables us to look outside the confines of our own discipline to understand how we work and serve. Military discourse may seem an unlikely reference point for academics seeking to understand their work, yet thousands of veteran students across the country certainly have much to teach faculty. In the introduction to their 2015 anthology, *Generation Vet: Composition, Student Veterans, and the Post-9/11 University*, Sue Doe and Lisa Langstraat explore the complex relationship between civilian faculty and veteran students on college campuses, noting that these individuals' "values overlap in significant ways" (p. 18). We see such an overlap with work and service. Military leaders compose lesson plans, teach, and reflect with new soldiers while maintaining effective communication through writing and speech—pedagogical tasks akin to teaching first-year writing. Further, the military's conception of service offers valuable insight as we consider the larger causes that can be served by written literacies. Service is an essential element of veterans' literacies, and by understanding what service means in this realm, faculty may be able to understand their own work differently.

If we regard our own service as carrying the same intellectual and emotional weight as teaching and research, we could develop a more resonant definition of work. Dan regards service as a value he established in the Army: viewing his new role within academia through service provides a sense of security and belonging for his military/service identity and adds rhetorical weight to his ethos. Further, when work has been emblazoned in service—work that is recognized, distinguished, and selfless—an ethical individual cannot help but always work with a higher level of determination. Similar to soldiers asking for the toughest missions, the best scholars pursue more demanding texts and work to achieve advanced knowledge in their fields. The parallel is not perfect, yet we can glean new meanings about work by

considering how servicemembers and scholars offer their training and expertise to their communities with an understanding that such work may require sacrificing one's personal life, time, and even money. In some ways, service is an individual choice and a selfless act, much like taking an oath of military service or the noble dedication to student learning. When work has been imbued with service, one cannot help but perform at a higher and more fulfilling level.

When we revised this piece on Veterans Day, which marked the 100th anniversary of the WWI armistice, we also celebrated Dan's third year as a veteran. Dan's conception of service became ingrained in him during the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command. What remains is the shouting of a Drill Sergeant, someone who instilled a sense of pride in some soldiers for the first time in their lives by telling them to value the choice they made to serve and defend. A dedication to ideals can motivate those who serve and become the nucleus of service. Echoes of this experience influenced Dan as he noted Brenda's dedication towards his academic development, particularly in fostering the intersection of his military and scholarly work. She closely assessed his work, motivated him, and pushed him for deeper thinking and reflection. When mentoring drifted out of the classroom into office hour chats, walks across campus, and coffee shops, Dan made a connection: this is service, too.

As a non-commissioned officer, Dan was familiar with the time and effort involved in mentoring soldiers, an experience that contextualized how he understood Brenda's commitment to his academic work. From our own experiences, we see service as the vigilant polishing of one's scholarly ethos through committed praxis to one's students and field. Of course, the term service is far from neutral, as service carries echoes of volunteerism, altruism, and sacrifice—hence, the Army's use of the phrase “selfless service.” While we have begun to unpack the meaning of work and service, we also have

more thinking to do. Yet, we maintain that by exploring work through the lens of service, we might be able to elevate the work we do to an even higher standard, one that deserves greater merit and recognition.

## References

- Adler-Kassner, L. (2008). *The Activist WPA: Changing stories about writing and writers*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.
- Council of Writing Program Administrators. (1998). *Evaluating the intellectual work of writing administration*. Retrieved from <http://wpacouncil.org/positions/intellectualwork.html>
- Doe, S., & Langstraat, L., Eds. (2014). *Generation Vet: Composition, student-veterans, and the post-9/11 university*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.
- Enos, T., & Borrowman, S. Eds. (2008). *The promise and perils of writing program administration*. West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press.
- Heilker, P., & Vandenberg, P. (2015). *Keywords in writing studies*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.
- Horner, B. (2000). *Terms of work for composition: A materialist critique*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- McLeod, S. H. (2007). *Writing program administration*. West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press.
- U.S. Army. *The Army Values*. Retrieved from [www.army.mil/value](http://www.army.mil/value)